

2001HANOI03086 - UNCLASSIFIED

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ACTION EAP-00

FM AMEMBASSY HANOI
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 4823
INFO AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH CITY
AMEMBASSY BANGKOK
AMEMBASSY PHNOM PENH
AMEMBASSY VIENTIANE
USCINCPAC HONOLULU HI

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: SOCI PINS PGOV ETRD VM
SUBJECT: LIFE ALONG ROUTE ONE

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- B. HANOI 2963
- C. HANOI 2949
- D. HANOI 2885

12. (U) NATIONAL HIGHWAY ROUTE ONE IS THE ARTERY LINKING VIETNAM'S THREE MAJOR REGIONS, STRETCHING FROM CA MAU PROVINCE ON THE GULF OF THAILAND TO LANG SON PROVINCE ALONG THE CHINESE BORDER. MOST OF ITS LENGTH SKIMS VIETNAM'S DESERVEDLY FAMOUS COASTLINE, OFFERING SPECTACULAR VIEW AFTER SPECTACULAR VIEW. TRAVELERS -- E.G., POL/C AND POL FSN DURING THEIR OCTOBER 25--NOVEMBER 2 TRIP BETWEEN HO CHI MINH CITY AND HANOI -- SOON GROW FATIGUED BY THE CONSTANT REPETITION OF "HOW BEAUTIFUL."

13. (U) NO OTHER ROADS NOW LINK THE COUNTRY, ALTHOUGH WORK IS UNDERWAY ON TRANSFORMING PARTS OF THE ONE-TIME HO CHI MINH TRAIL INTO ANOTHER HIGHWAY. TWENTY-SIX YEARS AFTER "LIBERATION" OF THE SOUTH AND NATIONAL "REUNIFICATION," ONE MIGHT HAVE EXPECTED THAT THIS NATIONAL HIGHWAY HAD RECEIVED CENTRAL GOVERNMENT LARGESSE OVER THE YEARS TO FACILITATE INTER-REGIONAL AND INTER-PROVINCIAL COMMUNICATION. MAYBE IT

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HAS HAD, BUT IF SO, THE RESULTS ARE DISAPPOINTING. A FEW
MILES NORTH OF HO CHI MINH CITY, THE HIGHWAY TURNS INTO A
TWO LANE ROAD, MORE OFTEN THAN NOT WITHOUT CENTER OR SIDE
MARKINGS. IN MANY SPOTS FROM NINH THUAN ALL THE WAY THROUGH
TO QUANG BINH PROVINCE, FLOODS HAVE TAKEN THEIR TOLL EVEN ON
THIS BASIC INFRASTRUCTURE. (IN LATE OCTOBER, TRAFFIC ON
ROUTE ONE WAS SHUT DOWN ALTOGETHER AT TAM KY IN QUANG NAM
FOR MORE THAN A DAY DUE TO HIGH WATERS.) THE RESULT IS THAT
STRETCHES OF THIS NATIONAL ROUTE ARE LITTLE MORE THAN DIRT
OR MUDDY PATCHES. CONCERTED EFFORTS SEEM TO BE UNDERWAY TO
IMPROVE BRIDGES, ESPECIALLY SMALL ONES OVER DIKES AND
CREEKS, BUT IN THE MEANTIME ONGOING CONSTRUCTION OFTEN MEANS
ONE-WAY TRAFFIC. (NOTE: ACCORDING TO PRESS REPORTS,
JAPANESE OFFICIAL DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE AND/OR LOANS, WORTH
WELL OVER USD 130 MILLION, ARE FUNDING THE WORK ON 71
BRIDGES OVER SEVERAL YEARS. END NOTE) ONCE ACROSS THE
FORMER DMZ, IN QUANG BINH PROVINCE, HOWEVER, THE ROAD
BECOMES DRAMATICALLY BETTER PAVED AND MAINTAINED, ALTHOUGH
IT CONTINUES TO BE TWO LANES FOR MOST OF THE REMAINING

JOURNEY INTO HANOI.

14. (U) TRAFFIC IS REMARKABLY LIGHT, WITH RELATIVELY FEW TRANSPORT TRUCKS. IT IS POSSIBLE TO GO FOR MILES AT A TIME WITHOUT PASSING ANOTHER SEDAN OR TRUCK, ALTHOUGH THERE IS A STEADY FLOOD OF MOTORCYCLES AND BICYCLES AS WELL AS THE OCCASIONAL CATTLE- OR HORSE-DRAWN CART. FLOODS OF PRIMARY SCHOOLCHILDREN HEADING HOME ON FOOT OR BICYCLE AFTER THEIR HALF-DAY SESSIONS COMPOSE ONE OF THE FEW PERSISTENT "TRAFFIC JAMS."

15. (U) IT MIGHT BE TEMPTING TO ASSUME THAT MUCH FREIGHT
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MUST BE GOING BY TRAIN FROM THE TWO ENDS OF THE COUNTRY. THE SOLE MAJOR NORTH-SOUTH RAILWAY LINE RUNS PRETTY MUCH IN TANDEM WITH ROUTE ONE, CRISS-CROSSING REGULARLY AND OFTEN WITHIN SIGHT OF EACH OTHER. TRAFFIC ON THE HIGHWAY MUST COME TO A HALT AT MANY CROSSINGS, WHERE THERE ARE ALWAYS A SMALL BEVY OF PETTY MERCHANTS WITH LIFE'S DAILY NECESSITIES -- CANDIES, CIGARETTES, FRUIT, ETC. IN EIGHT DAYS OF TRAVEL, WE SAW NO MORE THAN 3-4 TRAINS A DAY, VIRTUALLY ALL OF THEM PASSENGER TRAINS. EITHER INTER-PROVINCIAL TRADE IS EXTREMELY LIMITED, OR MUCH OF IT IS GOING BY BOAT.

16. (U) SIGNS OF A VITAL IF LARGELY SMALL-SCALE PRIVATE SERVICE SECTOR ARE EVERYWHERE. DUSTY ROADSIDE RESTAURANTS POSITION EMPLOYEES IN THE STREET TO WAVE IN WOULD-BE CUSTOMERS WITH THEIR HANDS AND SMILES. BEACHSIDE BEER HALLS DO A BOOMING BUSINESS, AS DO UBIQUITOUS COFFEE/TEA RESTAURANTS, SOME OF THEM QUITE ELABORATE. AN ENTHUSIASTIC LEISURE CLASS CLEARLY EXISTS ALONG ROUTE ONE, ALTHOUGH THEY SEEM TO HEAD HOME FAIRLY EARLY. EVEN NHA TRANG'S HOPPING DISCO SCENE APPARENTLY CLOSES DOWN AROUND MIDNIGHT. NOT TO WORRY, THOUGH: AMOROUS COUPLES CAN STILL HEAD TO THE BEACHES AFTER HOURS. OTHER BEACH-SIDE HUTS EVEN IN A BACKWATER RESORT LIKE NHAT LE (QUANG BINH PROVINCE) APPARENTLY OFFER MORE THAN SEAFOOD SNACKS. THEIR YOUNG AND HEAVILY MADE-UP FEMALE STAFF GAVE EVERY INDICATION OF BECOMING MORE AND MORE FRIENDLY AS THE DAY WORE ON (WE ONLY STOPPED FOR LUNCH, WHICH SEEMED TO THROW THEM INTO A GOOD
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DEAL OF CONFUSION: "SOMEONE ACTUALLY WANTS TO EAT HERE?").

17. (U) APART FROM A FEW STRETCHES OF RUBBER PLANTATIONS, THE UTTER DOMINANCE OF RICE CULTURE WAS STRIKING, ALBEIT WITH CONSIDERABLE VARIATION ON MATURITY AND FERTILITY AMONG THE REGIONS. THE FARTHER SOUTH, THE MORE IMPRESSIVE. SANDY STRETCHES IN PHU YEN AND BINH DINH WERE MORE BLEAK, IN PLACES WITH EXTENSIVE SALT FIELDS. HA TINH, NGHE AN AND THANH HOA IN THE NORTH WERE AGAIN RELATIVELY MORE PROSPEROUS, WITH SOMEWHAT MORE VARIETY OF CROPS EVIDENT. HOUSING STANDARDS FOLLOWED THESE GENERAL PATTERNS. HOUSES IN THE VARIOUS SOUTHERN PROVINCES OFTEN SPORTED THE DATE OF CONSTRUCTION, WITH A SURPRISING NUMBER HAVING BEEN BUILT IN THE 1970'S, BOTH PRE- AND POST-1975. RELATIVELY FEW SEEM TO HAVE GONE UP IN THE 1980'S, WITH ANOTHER SURGE IN THE 1990'S. FOR FARMHOUSES, THERE WAS LITTLE TO DISTINGUISH THOSE FROM THIRTY YEARS AGO FROM MORE RECENT ONES, BUT EVEN VILLAGES AND TOWNS TYPICALLY HAD AT LEAST A COUPLE OF VIRTUAL MANSIONS IN THE TYPICAL TALL AND THIN FASHION FAVORED IN VIETNAM.

18. (U) REGIONAL DIFFERENCES IN ACCENT REMAIN SHARP, WITH ACCENTS IN CENTRAL PROVINCES LIKE QUANG NAM AND QUANG TRI, AS WELL AS THE MORE SOPHISTICATED CITY OF DANANG, DISTINCT CHALLENGES AT LEAST FOR ONE FSI-TRAINED DIPLOMAT. NATIONAL EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS, AND STATE-RUN TELEVISION AND RADIO BROADCASTS APPEAR TO HAVE DONE LITTLE TO DISPEL SUCH REGIONAL VARIATIONS.

19. (U) WHILE THE ISSUE OF THE VIETNAM HUMAN RIGHTS ACT INEVITABLY CAME UP DURING OFFICIAL MEETINGS (REF A), ALONG
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WITH OCCASIONAL COMPLAINTS FROM OFFICIALS IN PROVINCES NEAREST THE OLD DMZ ABOUT DOUBLE-STANDARD LECTURES FROM THE U.S. ABOUT HUMAN RIGHTS PROBLEMS DESPITE DAMAGE CAUSED DURING THE WAR, ANECDOTAL IMPRESSIONS AND UNSCIENTIFIC SOUNDINGS WITH OFFICIAL AND NON-OFFICIAL INTERLOCUTORS ALIKE INDICATED AN ALMOST ACROSS-THE-BOARD INTEREST IN THE U.S., FAVORABLE DISPOSITION TOWARD THE U.S., AND GENUINE EAGERNESS TO SEE THE US-VIETNAM RELATIONSHIP MOVE FORWARD. A GUIDE IN A QUANG TRI WAR MEMORIAL -- ON A HISTORICAL SITE WHERE IT WAS ALLEGED THAT THE US BOMBS DROPPED THERE HAD SEVEN TIMES THE DESTRUCTIVE POWER OF THE ATOMIC BOMB ON HIROSHIMA -- WENT THROUGH HIS RATHER HORRIFIC SPIEL WITH A STRAIGHT FACE AND CALM DEemeanor. WHEN ASKED SUBSEQUENTLY IF HE OR OTHER LOCAL PEOPLE REMAINED ANGRY AT THE U.S. OR RESENTED THE CURRENT DEVELOPMENT OF BILATERAL TIES, HE SMILED AND ANSWERED "NO, THAT'S ALL IN THE PAST. NO ONE WANTS TO THINK ABOUT THAT ANY MORE." IT'S NOT A BAD SUMMARY OF POPULAR

ATTITUDES ALONG ROUTE ONE.
PORTER

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